



DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSHI

MADONNA'S FLAIR FOR ADOPTING DIFFERENT PERSONAE IS UNRIVALLED. *CAMILLE PAGLIA*
INTERPRETS HER LATEST GUISE — THE GEISHA. PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK DEMARCHELIER



THIS PAGE 'Her vampy full-body postures have a calligraphic flare, like the serpentine border of an art nouveau print.' Madonna wears a silk dress, £680, Dolce & Gabbana. OPPOSITE 'Madonna presents herself with a wiglike Egyptian blunt cut and with Nefertiti's perfect, painted lips and serene, blank gaze.' She wears a viscose-jersey kimono dress, £409, Jean Paul Gaultier. Jade floral necklace, to order, the Palace Costume Company. For details, turn to Stockists. Styled by Arianne Phillips. Hair by Luigi Mureno. Make-up by Laura Mercier for Laura Mercier Classique

M

adonna Dominatrix, grandly making her queen's progress through costume history, has now entered her Japanese period. She is a decadent in the ancient Roman sense, espousing a jaded cosmopolitan pluralism that sees life as simply a kaleidoscope of fashion statements. Madonna has a positive genius for sexual personae.

Verbally shallow she may appear to be (in interviews, often annoyingly giggly or loftily pretentious), but she is a born dancer with a dazzling mastery of body language which she ingeniously translates into the graven iconography of still photographs.

In this new series of images, as in her flamboyant Kabuki choreography for February's Grammy Awards (which finally honoured her music as it richly deserves), she fuses Asian and Western style with authentically avant-garde imagination.

Back to her natural brunette after touring the universe of hues, Madonna presents herself with a wiglike Egyptian blunt cut and with Nefertiti's perfect, painted lips and serene, blank gaze. Madonna's jawline, smartly clarified over the past year, now seems chiselled in limestone. Her vampy full-body postures here have a calligraphic flare, like the serpentine border of an art nouveau print. Arm raised like a Surrealist curtain rod, she is Mata Hari in buttery black leather. The stance is Spanish, and the arm-length gloves belong to Rita Hayworth as the dancing temptress Gilda. In another shot, Madonna spreads her red wings like a cruciform Blessed Virgin, the haloed, duplex queen of a stacked deck of papal playing cards. This draped daughter of the Immaculate Conception is as impenetrably legless as a mermaid.

What has drawn Madonna to the persona of the geisha – one of the most notorious symbols of prefeminist woman, virtually imprisoned in the service of men?

The geisha was in practice a kind of drag queen, miming femininity by an elaborate code of artifice. There was no exposure of flesh, except for a rim of skin left around the abstract oval of the thickly creamed facial mask. And the long, ornate kimono suppressed voluptuous curves: the breast, in fact, has never been fetishised in Japanese eroticism.

The exhibitionist who has thrust her bosom at us in a thousand, sometimes tiresome ways now finds tranquillity in the geisha's vocabulary of concealment and understatement. The white image (on the cover of this issue) flattens and schematises

the breasts behind a trellis of silver bars, coolly spreading like moonbeams from the floating face. Like pilgrims at a shrine, we can look but not touch.

Motherhood may have softened and centered Madonna spiritually, as she claims, but the geisha's heavy sash, as ritually binding as a priest's cincture, could suggest some unease with pregnancy's ripe swellings, as well as a fatigue with fame's back-breaking burdens. The waist-belt as body armour warns men away: for all her sprawling tribal entourage and chain of shadowy lovers, Madonna is self-confined in aching mental solitude. Her primary relationship is with her audience, whom she summons only to push away.

Strangely, just when she is invoking the geisha's refinement and porcelain-doll delicacy, Madonna herself seems to be becoming obtrusively mannish. The big hands and splayed thumbs emerging from the crimson Japanese robe of her *Nothing Really Matters* video look like those of a stevedore,

lumberjack, or autoworker from her native Detroit. The lean, hard-wire-tight boy's biceps and the massive, bulging knee and calf muscles that she flaunted at the Grammys seem to belong to Michelangelo's Herculean *Moses*, the prophet *in extremis*. The Asian art of yoga seems to be turning Madonna into an androgynous samurai.

Not since Marlene Dietrich and Joan Crawford has there been a superstar more shrewdly aggressive and confidently visionary in her creative self-conceptualisation. The faces and forms that Madonna has offered us to contemplate over the past fifteen years have been more interesting and enduring than anything produced by the high arts in the same period. Amid the tinselly hoopla and hype of her commercial projects, Madonna's photographs, luminously reproduced in glossy magazines, have brought deep aesthetic pleasure to millions around the world. Her appeal is transcultural.

But is she running out of modes to pillage for her ever-expanding costume library? Perhaps Aztec

pyramids, Hawaiian volcanoes, or Siberian steppes will serve as the next stages for Madonna's extravagant fantasies. At the moment, however, the austere formality and circumscribed space of this dreamlike geisha series suggest that Madonna is responding to Western women's subliminal dissatisfaction with their sexual lot. What is femaleness, and where can it reside in a world ruled by politics and commerce? We are all like Madonna, paralysed before that mystery.

Camille Paglia is Professor of Humanities at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia. Her latest book is *'The Birds'* (BFI Books, £7.99).

ARM RAISED LIKE A
SURREALIST CURTAIN
ROD, SHE IS MATA
HARI IN BUTTERY
BLACK LEATHER.
THE STANCE IS
SPANISH, AND THE
ARM-LENGTH GLOVES
BELONG TO
RITA HAYWORTH AS
THE DANCING
TEMPTRESS GILDA

OPPOSITE Madonna wears a leather top; trousers, to order, both 'Sold', by Jenisa Washington. Shoes, to order, Michelle Mason. For details, turn to Stockists





'Madonna spreads her red wings like a cruciform Blessed Virgin, the haloed, duplex queen of a stacked deck of papal playing cards.' Kimono, to order, Jean Paul Gaultier. Hand-embroidered cummerbund, to order, Dolce & Gabbana. Headpiece, to order, the Palace Costume Company. For details, turn to Stockists